

Risk: *If you don't fail now and again, it's a sign you're playing it safe.* —Woody Allen, actor/comedian

HED's Environmental Branch support helps keep Army's Pohakuloa Training Area open

*Story and photographs by Beth Miura,
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Training is essential for military readiness and available land in the state of Hawaii is scarce. That makes the Army's remote Pohakuloa Training Area on the Big Island of Hawaii vitally important. Support from the Honolulu Engineer District (HED) Environmental Branch ensures PTA complies with environmental regulations and stays open so soldiers and other service members can train.

"During a typical year we have 15,000-18,000 soldiers, marines, airmen and sailors training here," said former PTA commander Lt. Col. Dennis Owen. "Our biggest customers are the Army's 25th Infantry Division and the 3rd Marine Regiment at Kaneohe, but all the other services and reserve components and even local law enforcement units train here, too."

PTA provides a combat training area for full-scale live fire and field-training exercises. The U.S. Air Force, U.S. Marines, and U.S. Navy also use the impact area for bombing practice.

The 108,000-acre installation is the U.S. Army Garrison, Hawaii's largest live fire range and training complex.

PTA consists of three areas: cantonment, airfield, and training (which include approximately 54,000 acres of impact area). Within the training area, there are 22 live-fire ranges, seven airborne drop zones, 113 surveyed field artillery and mortar firing points and 19,000 acres of maneuver area where platoon to brigade-sized units conduct combined arms, multi-echelon, and joint service exercises.

Despite its remote location, which presents difficult transportation and logistical challenges, units come to Pohakuloa virtually year round for something they can't get anywhere else in Hawaii — room to train. PTA is the only military facility in Hawaii where units of 2,000-3,000 troops can train together at a single time.

A key factor in keeping PTA available for training is ensuring the installation is in compliance with environmental regulations.

That responsibility lies with the U.S. Army Garrison, Hawaii, Directorate of Public Works (DPW) Environmental Division. DPW partners with HED's Environmental Branch. According to Alvin Char, chief of DPW's Environmental Division, the Army takes very seriously its responsibility to be good environmental stewards and minimize any damage to the land caused by soldiers, weapons, and equipment.

Federal environmental compliance requirements are strict. If the Army doesn't comply, training can be stopped until corrective measures are taken. Should that happen, the impact on readiness could be disastrous.

PTA is located in the plateau area between Mauna Kea and Mauna Loa, the state's two tallest mountains, both more than 13,500 feet high. At an elevation between 6,000-8,650 feet above mean sea level, PTA is in the middle of two different climate zones. A complex mosaic of plant communities has developed in this harsh climate, in the midst of a heavily used training area. To date, there are 11 federally listed endangered and one threatened listed plant species in PTA. Of



Prior to examining an area for endangered plant species, a team of environmental specialists uses a map to identify sector boundaries.

those 12, three are found only at PTA.

PTA is not only rich in flora but also fauna. Five federally listed birds and one listed mammal species (the Hawaiian hoary bat) unique to the state of Hawaii are found there.

In 1995, DPW's Environmental Division developed a proactive ecosystem management program to enable military training to continue. Environmental Division requested HED's support to implement the ecosystem management because of the District's experience and expertise.

During the past six years HED has awarded and managed

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Morality: *There's harmony and inner peace to be found in following a moral compass that points in the same direction regardless of fashion or trend. —Ted Koppel, Nightline anchor*

Pohakuloa...

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more than \$10 million in contracts to protect threatened and endangered species at Army training areas in Oahu and PTA.

“Working with HED Environmental provides us with a multiplier effect with regards to natural resources and endangered species issues,” said Char. “HED has excellent contracting expertise and contacts in the scientific community and provides us with specialized and very highly technical expertise that enhances those skills and abilities possessed by our own in-house workforce.

The District also provides technical advice and has developed partnerships and contractual agreements with environmental groups, universities and private contractors and interagency agreements to ensure environmental-related services can be provided quickly.

HED awarded contracts to companies such as Brewer Environmental Services for alien plant control, Donaldson Enterprises for surveys of unexploded ordnance to support natural resources activities and Rana Productions/Reggie David for endangered bird



Close-up of endangered plant Hedyotis coriacea at PTA.

and bat surveys. The District also has contracts with non-profit organizations and universities such as The Nature Conservancy, Center for Ecological Management of Military Lands (Colorado State University) and the Research Corporation, University of Hawaii (RCUH) to perform flora and fauna surveys.

Though an interagency agreement, the U.S. National Park Service fenced 6,513 acres to keep out ungulates (feral goats, sheep and pigs) and protect native habitat and listed species. In conjunction with the fence construction, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Wildlife Services staff removes ungulates from the fenced-in areas. Safety considerations are a key element of this work, as portions of the enclosed areas are known to contain unexploded ordnance (UXO). Explosive ordnance disposal specialists from the 25th Infantry Division assist in clearance efforts.

Though another interagency agreement, the U.S. Geological Survey, Biological Resources Division (USGS-BRD) conducts studies on the biology and habitat needs of an endangered honeycreeper, insect surveys and monitoring to document distribution of alien insects, their effect on native insects and insect-rare plant interactions. An USGS-BRD and RCUH monitoring program addresses status and changes in plant species and communities that result from ecosystem management actions.

“We rely on the DPW-HED team for NEPA (National Environmental Policy Act) work and they really help us,” said Owen. “A recent example of this was an infantry unit that wanted to train in a training area we seldom use. We needed to get good cultural and plant surveys done quickly and in a matter of a week DPW and HED employees and contractors completed the field work and determined the unit would have no detrimental impact on the environment. The infantry maneuver training went off without a hitch and all the unit’s training objectives were met.”

With HED’s support and technical advice, the ecosystem management program is working and training continues at PTA. At the same time, the partnership of agencies studying PTA’s natural resources gathers valuable information that will help protect Hawaii’s environment. It’s a “win-win” solution that benefits everyone involved.



Fence crew installs barrier to protect endangered plants growing close to road within boundaries of Pohakuloa Training Area (PTA).